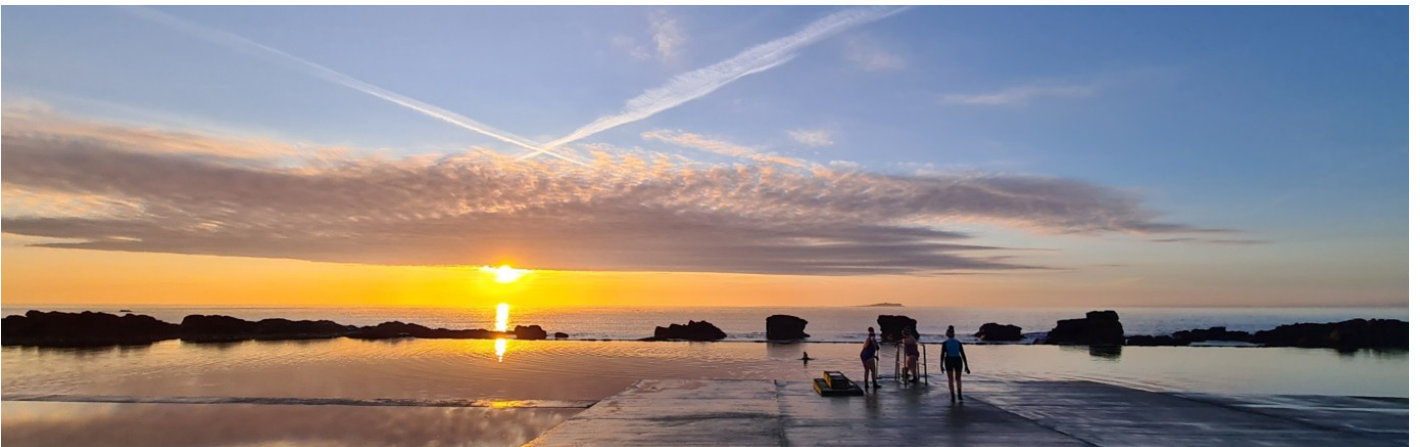


## 8

# Down By The Cool of The Tidal Pool: A Rite of Passage.

Jennifer Matthews

*Being an avid wild swimmer, this ethnographic project brought six months of participant observation and autoethnographic reflection at Cellardyke Tidal Pool to life. In examining wild swimming as a rite of passage, the narrative follows three recurring phases – arrival, immersion (“the dook”), and post-swimming community (“the circle”) – to explore liminality, incorporation and hierarchy. Drawing on theories of ritual (Gennep), liminality (Turner), and grid/group analysis (Douglas), the study demonstrates how leisure practices reproduce social structures while offering spaces for resistance and renewal. Ultimately, wild swimming emerges as both a personal and collective ritual, intertwining physical sensation, emotional connection, and cultural meaning.*



Picture 1: Cellardyke Tidal Pool

## PROLOGUE

*“For a man to pass from group to group [...] he must fulfil certain conditions.” (Gennep 1960: 1).*

**W**hen at high school I always wanted to be part of the in-group. I would try anything to be accepted. Like a fraternity. The rejection feeling

never leaves you, even in adulthood. A rite of passage that never materialised. When positioning myself as an observation participant within a wild swimming group, I never thought those feelings would surface again during my fieldwork (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; Tedlock 1991: 70). Setting my alarm for 0630, most mornings for the past six months has become a



and go to your happy place (Deakin 2000: 3).



**Picture 3:** Gopro Sensual Experience (Lewis 2025).

The video provides a visual experience of the senses in the water (Picture 3) (Pink 2006: 42-43). The word cloud from answers provides concrete narrative data (Picture 2). Observing and listening brought downsides: “are you recording”, feeling like a spy in the camp (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 52). The conversations became hushed. I took distance, went swimming later, came out later and gave space. It worked to an extent: When I stop sitting in the circle or offered a “shivery bite” I will know the rapport I have built up has been destroyed (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 141). Biscuits are important, like a reward for eating your veggies as a child. A shivery bite is a sugary reward, usually in the form of an abernethy biscuit. They are enjoyed by all: Captain Blue shouts: “I have the biscuits.”

## THE CAST



**Picture 4:** Colourful dry robes along the seawall.

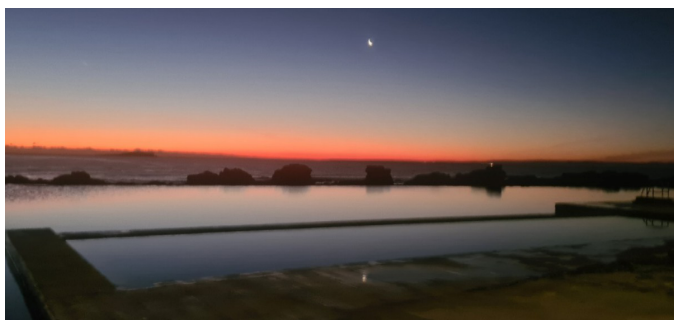
Dry robes align the sea wall (Bates and Moles 2024: 895) (Picture 4). Everyone has a favourite

colour. This narrative revolves around colourful characters (Ghodsee 2016: 35). In the circle they come together in a vignette; I observe them as their characters come to life (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 182).

The Pink Lady, who wears florescent pink dry robe, shoes and trousers, cannot be missed. She is the mind behind organising events. She has a reputation for wearing pink lippy at seven in the morning. She welcomes all with compassion. Tangerine Lady is the retired nurse, an academic who can converse on many subjects. She loves swimming lengths; I struggle to keep up. She can be found with her legs over the outer wall of the pool as she “loves the sun on [her] skin in the water.” Her orange obsession includes her car, although she prefers to cycle to the pool. The Captain Blue is a retired Navy officer, who is a central figure. She sits against the seawall. She loves the swim as a self-confessed “water baby” and prevents her “being grumpy.” As a newer member to the local community, she loudly welcomes people. The Red Twins are identical in dress: red robes and red Crocs. They sit together. One is the photographer of the group, never missing an opportunity to capture “antics and shenanigans.” The other has lived in the community her whole life, knows everybody (and their business), hence the whispers. They are swimming sisters. Cyan, the length counter has a serious exterior but a wicked sense of humour. One should not get in the way of her swimming; you will get a look. Her colour stands out in the circle like her laugh, facial expressions and her love of being part of the community. The Grey is a central character; without her I feel someone is missing. She loves swimming but absolutely hates seaweed and never looks down in the water. She asks me to clear a path for her: “This is what makes this wild swimming! The blasted seaweed!” She is passionate about the

community as a business owner and loves the pool being used. She is up for a laugh is first to sing and reads out amazing written poems about anything and everything. She flicks her hot water bottle off her feet, with her legs as a sign to all it is time to move. She always sits with her back to the sea, facing the group. Wetsuit, the retired teacher from my school, has been walking “doon” for a swim for decades. She loves floating on her back, being left alone. When she does talk, she has a vocabulary of Neuk dialect that brings memories or lessons to all in the group: “you are looking dirkish” or “you are a witch. Grab your besom.” She never hangs around the circle as she is always shivering, and her hip gives her jib. The Elder, is the oldest at 80 who amazes me. She is always busy rushing away but enjoys the passing chat and the “lovely water.” She has used the pool since before I was born. She used to ditch her clothes after the coastal walk and jump straight in. She has a little white drying towel which she has had for years. I like her idea of “chatting on the passing”; Every day she states: “it is just a good start to the day.” Like all stories there are backing supporter characters who add to the circle. These characters will appear throughout the narrative, adding more colour to the daily dook. The additional actors bring change to the swim as they swim only “when in the right frame of mind” (Camouflage Blue).

## CHAPTER ONE: THE ARRIVAL



Picture 5: Sunrise at 7.00

*“Swimming is a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries.” (Deakin 2000: 3).*

0700 is early (Picture 5). People are tired. Wetsuit says, “If I wake up, I get up.” Observing the setting up of gear, I notice people use the same peg every morning. There is an unannounced hierarchy of who goes where, Captain Blue is there first and sits central. There is a note of excitement in the air. “I cannot wait to get in the water.” We wait until everyone has arrived. Apart from Tangerine Lady who is usually late. The morning chat covers the night before antics or the excitement of an upcoming event. The feeling of anxiety touches the air. Emotions come to the surface through nervous laughs, jack-jumps to warm up or a rendition of “high-ho it’s off swimming we go.” Tangerine Lady says, “I need this.” The whole daily experience of the chapters of swimming, feel like a daily rite of passage. The group go in the water as a separate community from society then come together as a group of liminality in the water and when they come out, they are rejuvenated, different. Going in is great to observe. The sound effects are vocal. The tidal pool acts like a sound wall, with chatting, laughing and singing providing surround sound. The arrival sign posts a separation from the larger community, a ritual which brings only the dookers together and leaves something of their past behind. This could be sleepiness, stress, aches and pains, and just a great start to a new day. Being in the water is transitional: like cleansing emotions, reflection on the day ahead and the anticipation of “achieving something.” (Gennep 1960).

## CHAPTER TWO: THE DOOK

*“When you swim, you feel your body for what*

*it mostly is – water – and it begins to move with the water around it.” (Deakin 2000: 3).*

The senses come alive when you leave the ladders, pushing yourself away from land. The pool is not deep, only in the central channel your feet cannot touch the bottom. The group spreads out; individual routines take over. Cyan counts the lengths; the others rely on her to count. A new sense is born in the tidal pool. A sense that makes this chapter most special to me, you must be there to feel it. Captain Blue says, “I feel like a little kid!” Once past the initial cold-water shock, the discussion of temperature ensues. Babs, the retired postie has her plastic octopus topped thermometer, which was launched in first before we go in. Over the past few months, the temperature rise has been phenomenal: from 5.2 degrees to 12.3 recently, this makes the group stay swimming longer:

“I don’t want to get out.”

“Let’s do two more lengths.”

“That’s an odd number. We can do three more. To make it even.”

“Ok. Twist my arm.”

In the water the ladies have their own habits. The Red Twins state that “nothing beats a good natter while in the sea.” Others swim on their own with purpose: Elder says, “I like to make sure the Isle of May is still there.” Some bob about while wearing their Cellardyke Tidal Pool bobble hats. It is a symbol of belonging to the pool. Anyone can purchase them from The Grey’s shop. The Lookout, who lives next to the pool, is a weak swimmer but feels safe “bobbling about with friends.”

This chapter merges two of my research theories together in a water bound way. The sense of

“isolation” (Gennep 1960: 26) as a group makes it unique as we are “betwixt and between.” (Turner & Turner 1967). We are a community in the water in limbo. We become a group in the water, connected by the water. The water cleanses our senses and makes us feel together through the tingly feeling. The separation of the group in the water, doing their own thing or in mini clusters recalls the strength of individuals in a group. The group has nucleus of characters that are central figures. The types of established members of who is and isn’t allowed in become a “clash of wills.” (Douglas 1982a: 2). As Pink Lady said: “there are no rules in the group all are welcome. (The rules of admission were weak) What started as 5 are now 35.” The rules today are stronger:

Pink Lady smiling while swimming said: “We will need to add you to the group chat.”

I smile, elated. “That would be fantastic. Then I would know if swimming plans changed. Especially with advance warning from The Lookout.”

A few mornings later, before I started my research, Pink Lady approaches. She looks annoyed.

“Sorry admin has decided to add no more members. I am Fkin fuming about this. Sorry about that outburst.”

This is the second time I felt hurt. I reply. Feeling deflated “I understand. Thanks for asking anyway.”

We swim off in different directions. Mary Douglas’s group/grid theory comes to life in the pool (Douglas 1982; 1982a; 2019). I look around me. I used to be an individual with no aspirations to join the group. Then being accepted through words allows me to join in with

the routine but not having the complete privilege of being a group member. I am in a high gridded rules position but low in the group. Others are rewarded through loyalty and secured in their place through respect and positioned in the hierarchy. The upper level is the “small-scale” (Turner 1997: 93) society, the faculty who potentially “coerce” members to follow the core group. Thus, returning to high school and the closed clique, who have a selective recruiting method (Douglas 1982a: 5). My interlocutors tell stories of “fission” (Douglas 1982a: 6), of break off groups called Wild Skins and Menopausal Mermaids. I ask how many times I must go through the daily process to bring about admission: “repeatedly, most important, since they secure for the individual a permanent right to attend or participate” which leads to what Gennep calls “habituation” (Gennep 1960: 178). I feel there, as do others but I am not there (Turner 1997). However, like all the ladies in the water I return to enjoy the senses water gives me and ignore the emotions the group gives me, after all I am here to enjoy my swim wishing like others that “I could stay in longer.”

### CHAPTER THREE: THE CIRCLE

*“Come out a whistling idiot.” (Deakin 2000: 4).*

Once through the drying routine which is a chore for all, the circle comes to life. Incorporation of the group has a new status or a “confirmation of a bond as rejuvenated swimmers “sensing achievement” and “ready for anything.” (Gennep 1960: 29). It resembles a circle at a party for games or a sporting team. The more I participant the less random the positioning appears. The main characters sit central against

the seawall, apart from, The Grey who always sits with her back to the sea. The rite of passage feels complete; the community has come together as fellow swimmers and friends. The eating and drinking and sharing of biscuit’s are a rite of incorporation which holds no bars (Gennep 1960). Shivering with the cold, their preferred hot drink in flasks or mugs which are personalised: Rainbow Hat’s china cup has the slogan: “dry robe wanker!” The topics of conversation can bring in the whole circle or breaks off into individual discussions. For most this aspect is the most important part of their morning swim. The friendships that have been forged over a lifetime, by the locals born and bred. Rainbow Hat said, “I love my swim but the community of friendship we have made will last a lifetime.” The incomers who are new to the area and to the pool are made welcome. Tangerine Lady said: “having lived in Anstruther for 20+ years coming to the pool three years ago is the first time I felt that I belonged to the community.” This sense of community interested my research, close to home. Although I have lived in Cellardyke for over Forty years I am considered an incomer. The Crafty Purple lady said: “my husband and I have become a part of the community because of the tidal pool.”

### DISCUSSION

This narrative of swimming with a group became almost an obsession (Wacquant 2004). I forgot why I swim in the first place. I believed that the more I went the more I would be accepted. The rite of passage to me was not a one-off event, like the first time anyone goes wild swimming, everyday felt like a ritual of process (Gennep 1960: 177). I did not want to miss a swim. My research thesis became twisted: focused out of the water. My interlocutors provided their

stories on how they feel:

“We have been in the group for 5 years. Feel ousted.” They nod in agreement. There is a pause.

I listen. Check I am recording. I wait.

*“Certain members took over the group. Becoming more powerful, undermining others. Last year the damage was done. Some members avoid swimming at 0700, they go later. It’s like a clique. They welcome strangers on false pretences.”*

I see the emotions of anger and upset. I sip my coffee. I respond.

“If we go back to the beginnings of the group the point was going for a swim, not being alone, right?”

They laugh. Breaking the tension.

Pink Lady responds “Yes, my husband used to go with me, not to swim. Then others asked if they could join me, so the Nae Richter’s were born. We used to go after work.”

I said “What’s going to happen? Are you avoiding the protagonists?”

They both try to talk at the same time. Laugh. Pink Lady smiles.

“We are going to start our own group. We will be called the “Sun Downers”. Would you like to be a member?”

“Absolutely. That would be cool.”

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